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SUBJECT: BELARUS: OSCE ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION GETTING SETTLED,
VOTE COUNT ACCESS UNCLEAR

¶1. (U) Charge met August 18 with Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission for the Belarusian parliamentary elections at the end of September. Ahrens was joined by his deputy, Dr. Beata Martin-Rozumilowicz, and Election Adviser Mats Lindberg. As of August 17, his 41-person long-term observer team -- which includes several AMCITs -- is in place. Starting August 22, the mission will begin hosting weekly briefings for member states' diplomats. Up to 300 short-term observers are expected next month.

¶2. (SBU) Ahrens detailed his ongoing interactions with the GOB, noting that he has meetings with Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov and Head of the Presidential Administration Vladimir Makey immediately after his arrival in Minsk. Ahrens added that he meets regularly with Central Election Commission (CEC) Chair Lidiya Yermoshina and CEC Secretary Nikolay Lozovik, and although his mandate is observation, he provides them with some clear indications of possible problems. Ahrens, a retired German diplomat, also asserted his complete independence from his co-nationals at the OSCE Office in Minsk and the German Embassy.

¶3. (SBU) One of the most glaring problems, which Ahrens and his team are working to take up with the GOB, is the issue of observation at polling places and of the vote count itself. So far, according to Ahrens, Yermoshina has only responded that observers' access would require individual permission from local electoral commissions, an answer that is clearly not good enough; without such observation, it would be impossible for the mission to state that OSCE/ODIHR standards have been met and the results will inevitably be disputed.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) Speculation continues to circulate here that the authorities will select a handful of weak, easily manipulated non-regime candidates to show the U.S. and the EU that the regime has reformed. It is true that some of the weaker minds in the diplomatic community are tempted by that prospect. However, given the joint USG and EU position that electoral conditions are the highest priority, it is reassuring to see the OSCE/ODIHR mission working to that end as well.

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